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Passing the Buck to Congress Won't Teach It Responsibility

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President Lyndon B. Johnson made a celebrated speech during the Vietnam war in which he held out an olive branch of cooperation to the North Vietnamese and threatened to bomb them back into the Stone Age if they didn't accept it.

The speech produced a memorable banner headline in the street edition of the West Coast newspaper for which I worked: "LBJ Goes Both Ways." Otherwise, the speech was a bummer and the prelude to a deeper and more tragic involvement.

The memory of this address was rekindled by President Reagan's recent foreign policy speech to a similar forum in Washington where he beat up on Congress for supposedly undermining his policies in Lebanon and Central America and simultaneously called for restoration of "America's honorable tradition of partisan politics stopping at the water's edge." Reagan's message also went both ways: it asked Congress to act responsibly while he irresponsibly passed the buck to Congress for losing Lebanon.

"I believe that once we established bipartisan agreement on our course in Lebanon, the subsequent second-guessing about whether we ought to keep our men there severely undermined our policy," Reagan said. "It hindered the ability of our diplomats to negotiate, encouraged more intransigence from the Syrians and prolonged the violence."

Even some of Reagan's advisers realized that this statement was hogwash. In Lebanon Congress rolled over and gave the president almost everything he asked. "The subsequent second-guessing," after the bombing that killed 241 U.S. servicemen, was produced not by Reagan's congressional critics but by the Long commission, a distinguished Defense Department body that exposed the pretensions of the U.S. mission in Lebanon.

The Reagan speech is an example of how presidents who want to blame others for their mistakes can allow past involvements to get in the way of present ones. The past conflict was Lebanon, which Secretary of State George P. Shultz is trying to justify retroactively against the evidence. The present conflict, most on Reagan's mind, is the U.S. involvement in the open war in El Salvador and the semi-covert war in Nicaragua.

The Lebanon passages in the speech worked their way out of the State Department and through the offices of national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane, another architect of the Lebanon involvement. In the White House they were joined to a meandering overview that was supposed to lay out the fundamentals of Reagan foreign policy in an election year.

What emerged instead, from a process directed by presidential assistant Richard G. Darman and joined in by other advisers, was a series of homilies stitched together as two goals, eight principles and four challenges. (Sample goal: "a safer world." Sample principle, believe it or not: "intelligence." Sample challenge: "We must restore bipartisan consensus in support of U.S. foreign policy.")

When administration officials hand Reagan a flabby and ill-focused speech and he duly delivers it, they never blame themselves. Invariably, they blame the news media for focusing on what is new rather than on such sonorities as, "I see America and our Pacific neighbors going forward together in a mighty enterprise to build dynamic growth economies and a safer world."

The speech, and Reagan's lashing out at Congress in a news conference two days earlier, made it appear as if the president were preparing for a campaign in which Congress would be made the goat for foreign policy failures. This was not the intention, but the impression was augmented by the remarks of a senior official who suggested, as an example of bipartisanship, that members of Congress write letters to the president rather than complain publicly when they don't like what he is doing in foreign policy.

The president's men have since added to their rationalization, blaming the media for a bad speech by saying that everything would have turned out all right except for congressional resentment of the CIA-directed mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the attention given this story by the media.

Almost exactly the opposite is true. The president can make a case for U.S. involvement in Central America and intends to make it, however unpopular it may be with Congress or columnists. It is probably true, if he is willing to curb CIA excesses, that Reagan can win popular support for the proposition that Central America is more vital to U.S. interests than was Vietnam or Afghanistan or Lebanon.

And it is certainly true, if the Lebanon litany is eliminated as it should be, that Reagan can argue that "Congress has not yet developed capacities for coherent, responsible action to carry out the new foreign policy powers it has taken for itself."

This was the most interesting sentence in the speech, worthy of further attention by the president and Congress. But it was drowned out in the statement of the two goals, the eight principles and the four challenges—not to mention the self-serving attempt to rescue a failed policy in Lebanon by blaming it on others.

"We can attack Congress, or we can appeal for bipartisanship," a Reagan political adviser said last week. "But it probably stands to reason that we can't do both in the same speech."